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ABSTRACT

This report examines the various functions and operations of the shelving unit in the academic library, including staff organization, personnel selection, staff supervision, staff morale, staff training, administrative tools, and equipment utilized. The practical experiences of the shelving unit of the M. D. Anderson Library of the University of Houston are used to illustrate various points made in the text. Nine references are listed. (FM)

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THE SHELVING UNIT:

PRACTICE AND ADMINISTRATION

IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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THE SHELVING UNIT:

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IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY.

BY: HOLBROOK W. YORKE
NIGHT MANAGER

M. D. ANDERSON LIBRARY
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Northwest entrance
M. D. Anderson Library

THE SHELVING OF BOOKS! What is your immediate reaction to that phrase? More often than not the emotional content is negative rather than positive. To many "workers in the vineyard" shelving conjures up pictures characterized by boredom and frustration coupled with low self-esteem. There seems to be too little appreciation or understanding for the task of shelving, both among the ranks of the library's staff and in the community of the library's users. The library's staff tends to look upon shelving as a menial task beneath the range of its responsibilities. The users' awareness of the shelving operation too often comes from annoyance, either at not finding a book on the shelf or at having their concentration disturbed by a shelver working in the vicinity.

Have you ever gone into the library and noticed volumes pulled from the shelves piled everywhere? This can be particularly frustrating when the book you are looking for is neither on the shelf nor charged to circulation. Without adequate staff and organization, the shelving of books can be a major problem for the academic library. The number of books pulled from the shelves and left lying about the library can be very large. From January 15 to April 30, 1979, the shelving section of M. D. Anderson Library shelved 121,309 books and bound periodical volumes from in-house use. Inadequate staff, large gaps between the hours

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the shelving unit operates and the hours the library is open plus poor organization, training and supervision of staff will result in a great back-log of books to be shelved and many frustrated patrons.

The purpose of this article is to examine the shelving unit in the academic library. The various functions and operations involved in a successful shelving unit will be analyzed. These functions include staff organization, personnel selection, staff supervision and morale, staff training and the administrative tools and equipment utilized. The practical experiences of the shelving unit of the M. D. Anderson Library of the University of Houston will be used to illustrate various points made in the text. The objective of this examination is to gain a better understanding of the organization and functions of the shelving unit and how these factors are combined and applied to accomplish the task of the shelving of books.

STAFF ORGANIZATION

The personnel make-up of the shelving section of the circulation department will vary from library to library. It will be affected by the number of books in the library's holdings, the number of separate stack areas, library usage, library hours and a number of other variables unique to the particular library. Following is a suggested organization table for a shelving unit.

The unit will be managed by a shelving unit supervisor. The supervisor's objective will be maximum efficiency achieved through minimum handling coupled with well planned procedures. The supervisor will want

to develop a supervisor's manual so that in an emergency, someone else could step in and take over supervisory responsibilities with as little confusion as possible. The supervisor must work up solutions to problems as they arise (i.e., a deluge of incoming books at the end of a semester). The supervisor's major activity, however, is the hiring, firing, training and supervision of the personnel of his section. The supervisor must be able to identify the type of individual who will work successfully in the shelving unit. An example of a minimum requirement would be the ability to understand and shelve according to the library's classification system. Training often consists of On-the-Job-Training (OJT) and can be superficial. This is an important step that should be supervised carefully, but more about this later. Finally, the supervisor will have a heavy responsibility in the day-to-day scheduling of the shelving unit. The supervisor will want to oversee the work-flow at all points, relieving log-jams when they occur. In managing all these aspects, the supervisor must be constantly alert to the morale needs of the shelving unit personnel.

The assistant supervisor will directly oversee the operations in the sorting room, both receiving and shipping and also spend as much time as possible with the personnel in the various stack areas. The assistant supervisor will pitch in and help with the work flow when it is expedient to do so. The assistant supervisor's function is a line function. The assistant supervisor releases the sueprvisor's time which is then utilized in the administrative functions of the unit (planning, consulting, meetings, reports, etc.).

Picture of shelver
working in the stacks

The next slot in the hierachy is that of the area supervisors on the various stack floors. The area supervisors are the shelvers for the areas assigned and are responsible for doing or overseeing the shelving, shelf-reading and general maintenance in their particular areas (i.e., reshelving books pulled and left in the stacks, picking up books left on tables, in carrels or study areas and shifting books to allow for expansion). The area supervisors will supervise any stack attendants assigned to their area.

Another unit on the organization chart of the shelving section could be a shelving team. This unit could consist of additional staff or be composed of re-assigned staff within the unit. At the end of the academic semester, M. D. Anderson's shelving section, like the shelving sections in other academic libraries, is confronted with a deluge of incoming books, both those being pulled and used in the library and those being returned through normal channels. The reasons for this deluge are the usual: term papers, final exams and end of semester returns from faculty, students and staff. To meet the crises caused by the greatly increased demands on the limited staff, the shelving staff is organized into a team (consisting mainly of work-study students) which moves into the areas where the log jam is the greatest. The supervisor is the overseer for the unit and makes the work assignments. The team effort greatly decreases the

time needed to clear up a log jam in a particular area. This visable accomplishment greatly enhances the morale, both of the areas supervisor and the shelving team (not to mention the library's patrons and administration).

The final entries on the organization chart are the sorting room and stack attendants. At M. D. Anderson they are made up of work study students who come in on a part time basis. The low wages and the many academic pressures that the work-study student is subject to cause many problems (morale, scheduling and keeping staff) when working with this group. However, without the dedicated service of many outstanding work-study students, the library's mission would be crippled in many areas.

PERSONNEL SELECTION

The following ideas will, hopefully, be helpful in setting up the personnel selection guidelines for the shelving section. The shelving supervisor should be an individual who can visualize the total picture of the shelving operation and be able to keep it running smoothly in all circumstances. The shelving supervisor's major talents will be in the areas of organization, administration, and the motivation of people. The shelving supervisor will be an idea person who will develop and implement the solutions to problems as they arise. This is a full time position. In the academic library the shelving supervisor is usually someone who has some college background. Often the shelving supervisor is a part time student. The assistant supervisor will have a profile similar to the supervisor. The assistant supervisor's major talent will be in the area of the motivation and supervision of staff. This can also be a full time position.

The area supervisors, sorting room attendants and stack attendants come from various sources. Senior citizens, men and women, can be successfully used in this area. This spring, M. D. Anderson hired five senior citizens who work in the shelving section and most of them are area supervisors. Work study students are hired as attendants; but as stated above, because of their particular situation, they do not always prove as reliable as regular staff. Another source of recruitment is faculty or graduate students' wives. If the budget will allow it, it is recommended that some or all of the area supervisors be full time clerical assistants who have the capability of shifting their talents to the areas where they are most needed at the moment (clerical, sorting room, shelving).

The shelving sueprvisor must assess the capabilities of staff hired and utilize them in the most effective manner. The subjective (aptitude) individual is the most suited to stack work since it can be very solitary work. Aptitudes are not always easy to identify from an interview and expensive aptitude tests may not be practical. It will be the skill of the supervisor which will bridge the gap between aptitude and level of task performance required.

At critical points during the year, the library may want to recruit other staff members to pitch in and help with the shelving operation. This has been done at M. D. Anderson and elsewhere. This is not a popular solution, however, since staff members are burdened and engrossed with the press of business in their own particular areas. If the library has subject bibliographers, they might be assigned a functional supervisory role for their particular areas which would involve the shelving supervisor.

STAFF SUPERVISION AND MORALE

Staff morale and supervision are intertwined. The caliber of supervision and leadership within the shelving unit will determine the level of success that it will achieve. All of us, who have any work experience at all, are aware that supervision can range from stifling tyranny to anarchism. To borrow a phrase from the Greeks, "the middle ground" is where good supervision originates. The shelving supervisor must know what it takes to get the job done, what the strengths and weaknesses of the staff are and be able to blend these two elements for maximum accomplishment. The shelving unit supervisor must manage an efficient operation without offending the sensibilities of the staff. The workers in the unit need to know that they have skills that are needed, that they are trusted, respected and appreciated. They want to feel that their efforts are resulting in fruitful accomplishment. That unique individual characteristic called personality, as possessed by the shelving supervisor, will have a tremndous impact on the morale of the shelving staff.

Shelvers abandoned and forgotten in the stacks will soon begin to demonstrate their boredom, frustration and resentment at isolation with declines in production, absenteeism or time lost in long conversations with friends who come to the area. The blame for this situation rests on the shoulders of the unit's supervisor. Either directly or through delegated responsibility, the supervisor must maintain effective communication with all members of the unit at all times. As stated earlier, the team approach is an excellent technique for achieving maximum communication and efficiency coupled with a high morale factor.

Competitiveness, team spirit and the strong leadership structure are the elements that facilitate its success.

STAFF TRAINING

Teaching new staff members, re-assigned staff or introducing staff to new assignments or procedures is a major responsibility of the unit supervisor. The supervisor's skill and success in accomplishing this responsibility will largely determine the skill and success of the workers in the unit. There are several methods of training available to the unit supervisor. These methods include the staff manual, On-the-Job-Training (OJT), self instructional texts, tapes, formal classes and tours.

The staff manual would be the first form of instruction that the new staff members receives. The manual includes such information as the mission of the shelving unit, the organizational structure of the library, personnel procedures and regulations pertinent to the unit plus any other relevant information. The weakness in the staff manual is that, often, it is passed out, stuck in a drawer and never read. The shelving supervisor should stress the importance of reading the manual and test in some manner to be certain that the material that it contains has been learned.

The most often used method of training new staff is OJT. This form of training, although informal, should not be haphazard and without organization. Here are six steps that you can use as a guide in planning your OJT training program:

- State the objective and the reason for training.
- Demonstrate every step in order.
- Walk the trainees through the steps.

- Let the trainee practice the steps.
- Test the trainee.
- If the trainee fails the test, retrain and retest.

The instruction should be clear and as simple as possible. Do not include unnecessary information in your instruction which only confuses. Paramount in the instruction is some form of testing (formal or informal) which will let you know that the trainee has learned the objective(s) stated for the instruction.

The other forms of instruction mentioned: self-instructional texts and tapes, formal classes and tours are expensive and too elaborate for most shelving units to consider. The important consideration is not the form of instruction but the creation of a well-informed, skilled and highly motivated staff. This should be done by the most efficient means available.

ADMINISTRATIVE TOOLS

The shelving supervisor will have to keep certain records in order to administer the unit effectively. These records will include an assignment roster, time sheets and statistical data. In addition to these, it is important that the supervisor compile a supervisor's manual as a reference tool for pertinent data needed in the daily operation of the unit. The supervisor will want to review the machinery of the operation periodically to be certain that no bottlenecks have developed. The supervisor can do this by various methods and one of these will be discussed below.

The supervisor's manual will contain essential job information which supports the management of the shelving unit. It is an administrative tool

that is constantly being revised with the coming and going of staff, new unit assignments, new equipment and procedures. It is never finished. Therefore, it should be kept in a loose-leaf binder which will facilitate the addition and deletion of material.

The supervisor's manual will include the following information: a mission statement, unit organization and individual job descriptions. The mission statement describes, in a brief written statement, the function of the shelving unit. It could read something like this; "The mission of the shelving unit is to receive, sort and return to their appropriate slot in the shelving areas, books and bound periodicals removed from the library's collection."

The unit organization statement would include such information as the organization chart for the library which would indicate the location (Circulation Department) of the shelving operation in the library's administrative hierarchy and the direct line of administrative responsibility. The manual would also include an inventory of the equipment assigned to the unit with serial numbers adn the quantity of each item possessed. The listing of job descriptions would consist of an entry for each individual on the shelving unit's staff. The information entered would be: the staff member's name, grade and position title. A listing of primary tasks would also be entered.

To insure the smooth operation of his unit the shelving supervisor will want to periodically review all the steps in the operation. One means of doing this would be to write a step-by-step narrative of the handling of a book from the time it first enters the shelving unit machinery until it reaches the shelf. The supervisor may also want to borrow a tool from

the data processors art and graphically depict the steps listed in a flow chart. This pictorial representation of an operation will help to determine the current effectiveness of the operation.

Finally, the shelving supervisor will want to keep statistics on the numbers of books handled by the unit during the course of a year. These statistics will be broken down in various ways according to the needs of the library and will show the number of volumes handled in a semester, the number of books returned to the Circulation Department and the number of books reshelved from-in-house use. Well kept statistics will show where the unit's been and where it's going. They will show the peaks and lows in the work flow and will be necessary in planning for staff, equipment and budgetary needs.

In the press of daily business, it is often easy to let the maintenance of these administrative tools take a back seat. This is especially true of the supervisor's manual. Setting aside regular blocks of time to work on these tools will make the task easier and will be well rewarded in benefits returned.

EQUIPMENT

Book-bin
Ref. Dept.
Photo-copy area.

Aside from the standard office equipment (desks, chairs, files, etc.) there is equipment that is unique to the shelving operation, these include book-bins, book shoots, a sorting room with shelving and book trucks. At M. D. Anderson there are two book shoots, one on the exterior to the building which is open when the library is closed and an interior book shoot located to the left of the Circulation Desk which is used when the Library is open. The library has excellent photo-copy facilities for its patrons with machines located in five different areas on various floors in the building. Since there is a heavy flow of bound materials to these points, book-bins are placed in these areas. These are the wooden box type with the spring loaded bottom (see above). The spring loaded bottom rises or lowers with the number of books placed in the bin and facilitates the ease in emptying. Experience, the number of staff members and the statistics mentioned above will help determine the number of book trucks that are needed. At M. D. Anderson shelvers can carry from two to three hundred books on a three tier book-truck, depending of the thickness of the volumes carried.

Sorting-Room
M. D. Anderson Library

The critical point in the shelving operation, the switch-yard, so-to-speak, of the shelving operation, will be the sorting-room. Books come

here from the various collection points in a disorganized mass. Here they pass from chaos into an organized and systematized collection and are sent to their various storage areas. It is important that this operation be well planned for maximum efficiency. At M. D. Anderson, the shelving is arranged against the four walls of the sorting-room instead of rows of stacks in the middle of the room. The literature confirms that other libraries have found this the most practical arrangement, both for the ease of handling materials and equipment and efficiency in movement. Experience demonstrates that some areas of the collection require more sorting room shelving than others, especially during peak periods. In M. D. Anderson's sorting room the L's (Education), H's (Social Sciences), P's (Literature, and Q's (Sciences) - Library of Congress Classification, require the most shelving space. Experience will dictate the amount of shelving that will be allocated to each class in the shelving area. A stack area designation, such as color coding will facilitate the flow of books from the sorting-room to the various shelving areas.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this article has been successful in arousing interest in the importance of a well planned shelving operation and has demonstrated how all of its many facets; staff organization, personnel selection, staff supervision and morale, staff training, the administrative tools and the equipment utilized are all equally important in producing a successful shelving unit. The shelving operation is a critical operation in the library. If the book can't be located on the shelf then

all of the other functions of the library: acquisitions, cataloging, reference and circulation loose their effectiveness. The contribution of the shelving unit to the library's mission must never be underestimated.

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